

Rural Tourism as a Strategic Option for Social and Economic Development in the Rural Area in Romania

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Abstract

The rural tourism is considered a strategy that can contribute to the decreasing of population mobility, creating employment opportunities, and also to the social-economic development of the rural area. Rural tourism and agritourism can satisfy the need for open space through recreation activities, responding to the increasing interest of the urban population for the natural patrimony and rural culture. Rural tourism marks the economic growth stimulation, the underdeveloped areas viability, the life standards improvement for local population. If the rural tourism accomplishes all these functions, it requires a development through which the resources durability is secured during its expansion. The tourism sustainable development in the rural area demands the ability to develop the tourism resources, creating links between different activity sectors in a certain way that the space value is preserved.

Keywords: *rural tourism, social-economic development, rural area*

Rezumat. Turismul rural ca opțiune strategică pentru dezvoltarea social - economică a zonei rurale din România

Turismul rural este considerat o strategie care poate contribui la scăderea mobilității populației, crearea de oportunități de angajare, precum și la dezvoltarea social-economică a zonei rurale. Turismul rural și agroturismul poate satisface nevoia de spațiu deschis prin activități recreative, răspunzând interesului crescut al populației urbane pentru patrimoniul natural și cultura rurală. Turismul rural marchează stimularea creșterii economice, viabilitatea zonelor subdezvoltate, îmbunătățirea standardelor de viață ale populației locale. Dacă turismul rural îndeplinește toate aceste funcții, acesta are nevoie de o dezvoltare prin care durabilitatea resurselor să fie asigurată în timpul expansiunii sale. Dezvoltarea turismului durabil în zona rurală necesită abilitatea de a dezvolta resursele turistice, creând legături între diferite sectoare de activitate într-un anumit mod astfel încât valoarea spațiului să fie păstrată.

Cuvinte-cheie: *turism rural, dezvoltare social-economică, zonă rurală*

Introduction

Rural tourism and agritourism, in the same time represents important elements of the strategic local and regional development, through which the resources should be used and granted in the most efficient way possible. Also, the tourism efficient organization and practice in the village demands, especially, the usage of the existing capacities in the destination area – usually small equipments or farms with a strong degree of familiarity; the direct contact with the local residents and area authenticity; avoiding the rural area sintering with a valuable tourism potential, and also the conservation and perpetuation of present values. At

the basis of rural tourism there are four essential elements (fig. 1), which creates it, as well:

In the last decades, the rural tourism has reached a rising curve. In its evolution from simple tourism activities and services to the ones today, more sophisticated and modern, this form of tourism benefited of favourable conditions of development. From the moment when most European countries had registered higher economical performances, the level of incomes, live standards and free time options of the population have risen to higher levels. Responding to new economic and social requirements, the rural tourism tried to become a viable alternative for the mass tourism, also the development of the communication ways, the means of transport modernization, specific infrastructure attracted important tourist flows for the rural space.

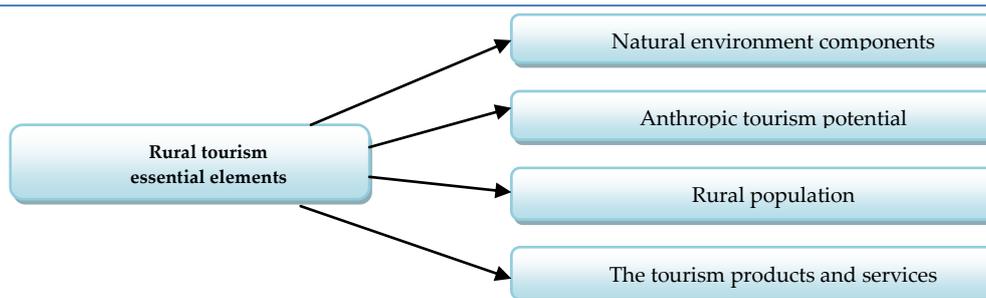


Fig. 1: The basic elements of rural tourism

Rural tourism is a complex activity, capable to determine mutations regarding the territorial profile development; from this angle, it is considered to be a method of attenuation for the interregional discrepancy, at a national and European scale. Furthermore, it promotes the consumption of different local resources, employment capital. It needs to be mentioned the tourism ecological vocation, in its strategic development the environmental protection has been imposed also.

On a social scale, tourism manifests itself as an education value, increasing the level of training, the local rural culture and civilization and the visitors, also. It made an important contribution to the population leisure activities and represents one of the main destinations for weekend recreation and holidays.

Tourism is an alternative and a necessity for the area social-economic recovery, its progress depending also on the national and local authorities assistance, but especially on the local community willing to change.

The rural space holds a variety of natural, historical, social-cultural tourism resources, indicating a high level of enhancing the value of the existing potential, moreover a significant factor in the social-economical development, being the main approach in the economic growth of an area. The tourism natural heritage is vastly rich and diverse, but is being only partial used.

The basic criteria and objectives for rural tourism

In the last decades, the EU regional development policies, together with the national policies of the member states encouraged the tourism orientation towards the rural areas, taking into account its effects and social positive implications. The studies made by the World Tourism Organization show the

fact that rural tourism is developing at a faster pace than the international tourism in its ensemble.

The necessary objectives in the tourism activities management in the rural area can be separated in three categories:

- ⊙ objectives that emphasize the prevention of rural population migration for the cities and the stimulation for returning to the rural settlements;
- ⊙ objectives that stress the lifestyle and civilization improvement in the rural space throughout additional incomes;
- ⊙ objectives regarding the rural environment protection and conservation (Mitrache et al., 1996), therefore with an ecological approach.

It is noticeable that, in the case of rural tourism and agritourism, the economic objectives (which express in a direct manner the interests of the involved parties in this certain activities) are correlated with the social objectives, unquantifiable, a fact that is reflected in the growing concern for social responsibilities of the farms or the agritouristic associations, responsibilities that require a “certain form of auto control”, of increased sensibility for the social aspects (Ionescu et al., 2002).

In addition, certain objectives can have a contradictory aspect, such as: the increasing tourist circulation and, also the rural environment conservation and protection; improving the available resources from the rural areas and the objective stating the natural components conservation.

Successful rural tourism systematization involves more than the simple idea of accommodation and meal, it also entails the fulfillment of certain basic criteria:

- ⊙ the rural function capacity, capacity that is build on the existence of additional factors with an impact on the agritourism (rural buildings, rural residents, tradition, rural aspect, agriculture activities, fresh air, fresh products);
- ⊙ the necessity of expanding the rural tourism practice further than the farms, in larger areas,

creating a similar spectrum with the recreation opportunities;

© the business requires to be organized in the close relation with the local families (Page, Getz, 1997).

In the long term, the social and economical development strategy of the rural area, the significance and evaluation of all types of capital (natural, human, economical and environmental) is a very important issue.

Tourism expansion involves the coordination between all activities sectors: agriculture and transport, commerce, industry.

The key factor in the tourism development in the rural space represents the application of favourable marketing studies, necessary for any national or foreign investor.

Characterized by a differential natural social-economic potential, the rural areas have low or high chances of local economic diversification. The premises of the tourism development complete approach entail the theoretical, practical, historical, organizational, economic, ecological, social and cultural aspects achieved a first step for indicating that the rural space has real chances to increase its present development status.

The Romanian rural tourism and agritourism evolution

The rural tourism is a new phenomenon, but old in the same time. The interest for rural recreation started manifesting itself since the 19th century, as a reaction to the stress produced by the urbanization and industrialization processes (Ratz, Puczo, 1998).

The rural tourism in Romania is practiced "since forever" (Galvan, V., 2003), but it is practiced "spontaneous, randomly and unorganized". Its beginnings are situated around the '30s and it is linked to the mountain and balneary tourism resources capitalization. Thus, it is focused on the areas of Bran-Rucar, the Olt Valley, Harghita-Covasna counties. Around the distinguished tourism locations, and also in their boarding rural areas, accommodation was offered during the summer, in the houses, later the activity developing with the construction of tourist boarding houses (The Industry and Commerce Ministry Report, 2004).

After the World War 2 and beginning of communism, as a political system, the tourism activity diminished till disappearance. The restoring of rural tourism was made between 1972 and 1974,

when a request from The Tourism Ministry launched the action of "identification", "for ratification" of certain "touristic villages" and peasant households from all areas. Therefore, The International Tourism Promoting Centre identified and selected 118 representative villages for Romania, which could be introduced in the internal and international tourism circuits. A year later, fourteen touristic villages were declared experimentally: Leresti and Rucar in Arges County, Fundata and Sirnea in Brasov County, Vaideeni in Valcea County; Sfantu Gheorghe, Murighiol and Crisan in Tulcea County, Sibiel in Sibiu County, Tismana in Gorj County, Poaiana Satara – Bacau County, Racos – Timis County, Bogdan-Voda – Maramures County, Vatra Moldovitei – Suceava County.

Although the touristic villages remained non-functional for the international tourism because in 1974 the accommodation of foreign tourists in the private households was banned, by law,. Only a few villages, which had the opportunity to establish external contracts through National Office for Tourism Carpathians-Bucharest, succeeded to follow up international activities, but only in that certain year (Rucar, Crisan, Murighiol, Sibiel).

The organized rural tourism started after the year 1989, with a focus on the mountain area of the country, which records a population of 1.7 million inhabitants and over 600 thousands family households, grouped in approximately 2 500 rural villages and towns (The Industry and Commerce Ministry Report, 2004).

After the year 1990, it was registered a promoting and encouraging tendency of the rural tourism and agritourism from the local and national authorities, and also from the professional associations from the tourism industry.

The first households that were listed in the rural tourism scheme were the ones from the Moeciu-Bran area, Barsa area, Dornelor, Maramures, Apuseni Mountains. Different associations were created, such as The Romanian Villages Association, in 1988-1989.

Other promoting associations for the Romanian rural tourism were formed after 1990, the most renown being: The Romanian Mountain Development Federation (1990), The National Rural, Ecologic and Cultural Tourism Association from Romania (1994), The Romanian Agritourism Agency (1995) and The Configuration and Innovation Centre for Carpatian Development – CEFIDEC (1994), ANTREC (2007).

The accommodation basis and rural tourist flows

Following the evolution of the accommodation structures specific for the rural tourism and agritourism, until 1995, according to the reports of the Ministry of Tourism, there are only few details about tourist and agritourist boarding-houses, and the mentioned tourist boarding houses contained the existing accommodation units, in the rural and urban areas, also. Thus, the situation of the accommodation structures involved in the rural tourism and agritourism cannot be evaluated.

Scarcely from 1996 there was a trend observed regarding the two categories: the classified and certified rural and urban tourist boarding-houses and agritourism boarding-houses; the number of these accommodation structures between 1995 and 1999 increased significantly, despite the fact that the support from the local and national authorities was almost inexistent regarding the organization.

The boarding-houses specific for this type of tourism are scattered in the mountain areas (where almost 25% of the total number of boarding-houses are located), hilly areas, the Danube delta, national and natural parks, peripheral areas. The evolution of the accommodation structures number registered, after 2001 an increasing tendency, the highest one being recorded after 2006 (Fig. 2).

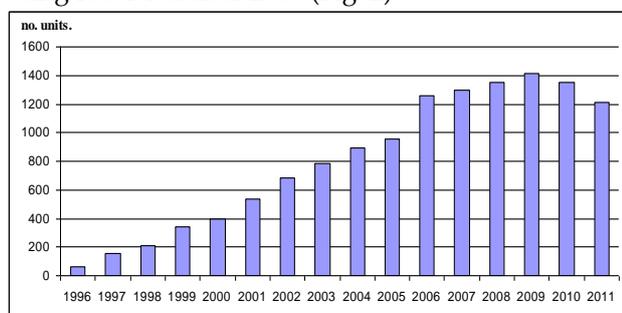


Fig. 2: The accommodation structures dynamics in Romania (1996-2011)

Albeit the existence of diverse and valuable tourism resources, of a large range of villages (approximately 13,000), the agritourist and tourist boarding-houses register a low number (1,050 structures and 1,210 respectively), with a total existent accommodation capacity of 20,683 guests in the agritourist boarding-houses and 20,499 guests capacity in the tourist ones, in 2011, circumstances that reflect a low interest from the rural residents to develop a private tourism business (table no. 1 and 2). At national level, a non homogenous dispersion is registered concerning the tourist boarding-houses,

a large number being centralized in the mountain area villages and in the renowned counties for their natural and anthropic tourism potential (Brasov, Sibiu, Arges, Suceava, Maramures, Vrancea, Tulcea, Constanta Counties).

The accommodation in the touristic villages or farms from the rural area can be organized and arranged under multiple forms, depending of the location and type of the area (mountains, hills, beach, close to national parks, delta or lake areas). The profitability is as higher as the location is strategically situated; the means of access are maintained appropriately, the opportunity of enjoying the beautiful landscape, local culture and the particular architecture are maximized.

The constant ascending trend of the rural tourism incomes, and also the rural tourism development projects implementation determined an increasing of the tourist and agritourist boarding-houses number (in certain areas with a high degree of centralization, rural micro resorts were formed).

The majority of the boarding-houses are included in the 2 and 3 daisies category, similar to stars, in the last 5 years boarding-houses of 4 and 5 daisies were created in the main national tourism areas. The tourist flow is linked with the accommodation possibilities development (Fig. 3).

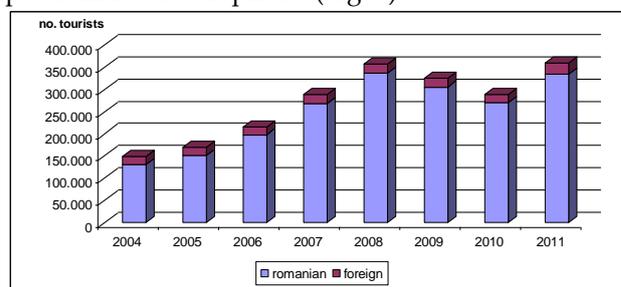


Fig. 3: Tourist flows evolution in the rural tourism product (2004-2011)

The tourism flow confirms the continuous increase in the number of tourists until 2008, afterwards registering a slightly decreasing trend caused by the economic crisis, so lowered financial opportunities, the rural boarding-houses being hired especially by the Romanian tourists and fewer foreign tourists. The phenomenon can be explained considering the decline in the ways of communication quality which secure the access for the majority of the villages, the modest recreation and leisure possibilities, the prices which are not always a reflection of the offered services quality. Thus, rural tourism and agritourism directs itself for the internal tourism and in a small range to the international tourism. The average length of stay was

low: 1.5-2.5 days/Romanian tourist and 2 to 3 or even more than 3 days/ foreign tourist.

Table 1 The accommodation structures evolution, rated by types of the units (1989-2011)

| Accommodation structures by type of units | 1989 | 1994 | 1998 | 2008 | 2010 | 2011 |
|-------------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Total number – from which: | 360.963 | 292.479 | 287.268 | 294.210 | 311.698 | 278.503 |
| Recreation villages | - | 38 | 36 | 180 | 157 | 307 |
| Tourist boarding-houses | - | 748 | 2.854 | 14.538 | 18.422 | 20.499 |
| Agrotourist boarding-houses | - | - | 1.003 | 16.906 | 20.208 | 20.683 |

Source: The National Statistical Institute, Bucharest

Table 2 The accommodation services evolution in the rural touristic product (2004-2011)

| Category | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Units | 892 | 956 | 1.259 | 1.297 | 1.348 | 1.412 | 1.354 | 1.210 |
| Guest capacity | 9.405 | 11.151 | 14.551 | 15.448 | 16.906 | 19.789 | 20.208 | 20.683 |
| Guest capacity-days | 2.132.008 | 2.528.316 | 3.188.350 | 3.625.647 | 4.038.817 | 4.735.468 | 4.891.862 | 5.378.364 |

Source: The National Statistical Institute, Bucharest

Consequently, the direct incomes obtained from the tourism services are low, the marketing being frugal, the direct communication between tourists and private boarding-houses owners being preferred.

The tourists that select a village as a holiday destination are the ones who use their private car, mainly because the local transport is inadequate, and the opportunities for surrounding visits are reduced. As a result, the rural boarding-houses investors redeem their investment in a period of seven to ten years, due to the fact that a prognosis about the ascending and constant tourist flows cannot be made (yearly) and there are no resources for an active marketing.

The socio-economical development of the rural space as a tourism activities consequence

The agritourism and rural tourism development amid certain limits, with the preservation of the other traditional activities (agriculture, artisanal) allows the local rural communities to evolve without major changes, to be involved in the modern economy assertion, without diluting the traditional characteristics. All the aspects and positive and negative effects need to be taken into account to allow a future sustainable development of the rural tourism. For rural tourism and agritourism to become factors in the social and economical development, there is the need to overrun the superficial approaches, empirical and use efficient political, economical, social strategies that place the village and its activities on a global tourism scale,

according to its future trends. Hence, there is a necessity to create certain means and tools that will support this activity field in the rural area at a further local and individual level.

For the countries with a great range of experience in the rural tourism and agritourism activities, the excessive tourism activities and accommodation spaces development was not always a progressive factor due to the fact that there were registered great losses in the traditional ways of life.

Rural tourism and agritourism can facilitate the diversification and thus the stabilization of the local economy, new business opportunities and consequently new employment opportunities, promotion and development of services, the change of employment force practice, attracting new investments.

Agritourism asserts itself as an activity capable to improve the accommodation resources present in numerous households, organized and arranged to receive guests for a limited period of time. Thus, the household owner is motivated to plan the interiors and exteriors of its property with the purpose of obtaining additional incomes, stimulated to develop complementary activities apart from its basics activities, to reach a quality standard required by the tourists. Radu Rey states the fact that "agritourism is not only an economical equilibrium factor, which gears a large range of additional factors and reproducible resources, but also becomes a cultural-educational intermediary, a constant and not very expensive tool for social progression" (Romanian Carpathians, 2001, p. 61).

Establishing a political, legislative, economical accurate frame will allow for this new type of tourism industry to evolve on an ascending trend and

economically attract the existing tourism resources, reducing the illegal practice of the tourism activities, clearly delimiting the classical forms of tourism, with which is commonly compared.

Certain changes in the rural areas were beneficial, while others were not, leading to alterations in the traditional ways of life, disappearance of some forms of culture and civilization. The phenomenon was determined by the fact that the rural area was not perceived as a whole, with a well-structured social and economical system. The villages degree of modernization requires to be maintained to an acceptable level, and temporary accommodation structures proliferation limited in time and space (for reducing the agriculture and forest areas which are used for new constructions and infrastructure modernization), because this way the new urbanization issues are transferred into the rural areas, as well.

The rural tourism evolution will depend on the local community economical potential, on the profitable agriculture activities, the development of public and private services that will increase the tourism accommodation units' comfort. The current rural boarding-houses have an island character and can be found especially in the well-known tourist areas (e.g.: the Prahova and Olt Valleys, Rucar-Bran couloir, Maramures, the Aries Basin). The increasing tourist flows will depend, to a great extent, not only on the accommodation structures development, but also on the leisure and recreation structures, as well. Thus, villages such as Bran, Moeciu (Brasov County), Arieseni, Garda de Sus (Alba County), Rucar, Leresti (Arges County), Corund (Harghita County), Ieud, Vadu Izei, Saliste (Maramures County), Sibiel, Biertan (Sibiu County) are areas where the preservation of certain agriculture, foresting activities permitted tourism to become an important alternative in the area development and assuring an acceptable income for the local residents.

Due to the increasing number of the residents that leave the rural area for other European countries, for employment offers, the incomes allowed the construction of modern housing, but only for their private comfort, not for tourism activities, especially because this group diverged from the old tradition and rural customs.

The tourism development influences, also, positively and negatively the social-cultural characteristics of the rural destinations. In what concerns the positive influences, it can be mentioned that rural tourism facilitates the efficient usage of the

existing resources (land, employment force, financial capital, natural and cultural attraction), brings social-economic changes, contribute to the monuments and rural area conservation, encourages relationships between the local residents and the tourists, increases the chance of learning more about other cultures (Keanne, Quinn, 1990).

The negative aspects are related to the fact that tourism in the rural areas modifies or degrades the rural landscapes, natural and cultural regional values, reorganizes the social structures (fact that can be interpreted also as a positive change), induces change in the life rhythm and intimacy, in authentic tradition and costumes presentation, adapting to the tourist desires.

The realistic environmental management, local implication, legislation frame, marketing strategies and plans are crucial in the rural tourism sustainable development and contribute positively in the local community lifestyle.

The economic impact, which can be materialized through the dynamic of the productive activities, economic branches diversification, supporting the traditional costumes and artifacts, includes the following aspects:

- ⊗ increasing the viability of settlements with modest economic resources;
- ⊗ amplifying the local residents' incomes;
- ⊗ modernization and completing the general and local infrastructure important for increasing the lifestyle standards;
- ⊗ organizing special areas for artisan activities;
- ⊗ an improved agriculture materials capitalization and secondary forest resources;
- ⊗ public services improvement with an important role in the lifestyle quality;
- ⊗ the local and regional diversification of tourism forms with a role in increasing the national and international currency incomes.

The social impact states the tourism activities influence over the traditional lifestyle, recreating old traditions and regional astronomical costumes, materializing through:

- ⊗ increasing the national recognized professional training for the young population involved in tourism activities;
- ⊗ increasing the number of the jobs in the art crafts manufacturing, infrastructure, agricultural and secondary forest material processing;
- ⊗ securing the public hygiene, local population and tourists' safety;

- ⊙ diminishing the poverty degree and developing a tolerance and comprehensive attitude towards tourists;
- ⊙ developing a positive conduct towards protecting the environment quality.

The cultural impact manifests itself through the regional and local cultural and civilization identity conservation, especially when minority groups are involved. This type of impact has beneficial effects that can be expressed through:

- ⊙ increasing the local residents interest for the preservation of minority culture;
- ⊙ organizing events and cultural-artistically manifestations, which can have a traditional activity potential;
- ⊙ allocating a part of the economical, commercial and tourism incomes for the cultural patrimony restructuring and conservation, and creating new local museums institutions.

For the rural villages to keep and develop their tourist function, it is necessary to solve certain issues regarding the general social-economical development level:

- General interest requirements have the role to assure a better local budget and a larger autonomy for prioritizing. Thus, very constructive initiative are: introducing a new fiscal policy in the rural areas, increasing the local autonomy, avoiding economical conflicts, local resources capitalization, developing an entrepreneurial spirit, completing and modernization of the general and local infrastructure, natural and historical monuments preservation and restoration, preserving the present environmental quality.
- Special interest requirements concern certain social-economical activities development which can provide the local population greater stability and viability for the rural villages throughout: agriculture and farming diversification, amplifying the possibilities for agriculture and forest materials processing, creating touristic structures according to the local tradition, traditional lifestyle and customs conservation.

Conclusion

Considering that the tourism services costs will increase in the well-known areas, due to the energetic issues pressure, this form of tourism tends to become a full expansion phenomenon, with a large opening for the inbound and outbound tourism. The development of tourism in the picturesque rural areas well organized, within a less polluted zone, with

traditional customs, a rich historical background, ancient monuments and housing will turn the tourist function into a desirable one and a constant in the social-economic development.

Rural tourism is requested to contribute, as a first step, in the maintaining and preservation of the agriculture services. Moreover, through its consolidation and modernization, it will become a premise for the local and regional social-economic development.

The development of rural tourism in Romania will require as a basis a strategy focused on the sustainable and integrated development principles, environmental protection, due to the over utilization of certain natural and cultural resources, accommodation and recreation structures concentration. In spite of the present important issues regarding the negative aspects of agriculture, low direct investments and financial resources for the rural areas, reduced agricultural professional training, rural tourism and agritourism begin to be more appreciated in the local Romanian villages.

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